

## ENTHUSIASM. A CONVERSATION WITH DZIGA VERTOV AND VASILY GROSSMAN

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*Abstract.* The paper is dedicated to the memory of journalist Hossam Shabat, who was killed on 24 March 2025 by airstrike on Gaza, in his twenty-fourth. The author researches cultural and historical narratives arguing or, on reverse, staying against the violence in the modern world, able to deeply impact on the ordinary Clickbait Citizen. Historical parallels with modern world leaders allow to see wider events as if repeating in numerous mirrors. Dziga Vertov's and Vasily Grossman's creative works help in appreciating the role and the impact of art on social conscience. The author provides also a list of the literature discovering ethnic cleansing, genocide and crimes against humanity.

*Keywords:* cultural and historical narrative, Russian aggression, cognitive impact, art and war.

While the EU is arguing about where to find the money for its rearmament plan, a parallel debate is quietly taking place: where to find the soldiers? This is where culture will be called upon<sup>1</sup>.

On 11<sup>th</sup> March 2025 Polish PM Donald Tusk told us that the Ukrainian army has 800,000 soldiers, whilst Russia has around 1.3 million. He wants to increase the size of the Polish army, including reservists, to 500,000 from around 200,000 today. Tusk explained that his government was working on a plan for military training for all Polish men. "Of course, it will be open to both sexes," he added. "I do not want to belittle the role of women here in any way, but war — due to physical conditions — is associated more with men."

Europe is at the precipice of a new age of war. Again. Because if a country the size of Poland is now placing all men into military training, then surely a new age of war is what this is.

For decades political leaders have categorically insisted that there was no alternative to financial austerity across the whole of the European public realm. And yet suddenly, within a few dizzying days (not even a month), we have jettisoned half a century of borrowing limits to invest 800 billion Euros in defence and the military. And this excludes the UK and its commitments. If only in terms of the abandonment of an economic orthodoxy, we are in a new age.

But this is not new. This is again. We ought to be conscious of what is coming towards us.

It is not for Clickbait Citizen to examine how we have reached a point where re-arming Europe is deemed to be necessary. Here we remain focused on the relationship between power and culture, the arts and the interplay between fact and fiction in the forming of social consent. Suffice to say that war and the arts have an interconnected history extending back to at least the ancient Greeks. Clytemnestra and Orestes realize in 'The Oresteia' that every attempt at one final act of violence only sets the stage for the next.

But I do want to take a brief look at the multiplicity of cultural and historical narratives, understandings, and tensions that re-arming will unleash across contemporary Europe.

Where one is situated, both geographically and culturally, has a profound impact upon the way one interprets the past and predicts the future, especially for us Europeans. Elsewhere I am convinced about how attitude towards Russia's aggression against Ukraine is rooted for many Bulgarians in seeing Imperial Russia, the Soviet Union and even Putin's Russian Federation as its national and spiritual brother, if not saviour. It is deeply embedded in a series of facts, assumptions and myths reinforced by a cannon of literature, contemporary school curricula, national hero days, street names, and other cultural and artistic paraphernalia. And this includes museums<sup>2</sup>. As Boris Groys explains more generally,

*The museum has taken its modern shape as a result of the French Revolution and subsequent revolutions and wars... The modern museum is constructed as a system of universal representation within a national cultural context, or as a kind of symbolic empire. In the context of modernity, the museum collects everything that falls out of fashion and out of use, as well as everything foreign, exotic, other. The modern museum is thus a symbolic space of the heterogeneous in the relatively homogenous context of the modern nation-state<sup>3</sup>.*

As Europeans are instructed to re-arm, each nation-state will reach for its own cultural references for legitimacy and reassurance. We need to know who we are, where we come from, what we are being asked to defend when we are about to send our children to war. If we follow one trajectory, the 'who we are' route, we Europeans will be defined by the multiple and contradictory myths and histories of our forefathers. If this

is the path we walk then our lands, borders, religions, ethnic groups and languages will determine our conclusion that most countries are more or less homogenous linguistically, religiously and ethnically. That is still a common definition of a modern nation-state in Europe. If we follow another trajectory we could reaffirm the principles and values that we share as citizens of democracies — equality, defence of plurality and human rights, diversity, intellectual openness, and generosity. This way we would arrive at another conclusion: Europe is a symbolic space, heterogeneous and values driven. Yes, I know which route chimes better with a populist vibe and call to arms. But what is clear is that a guiding hand from our forefathers will lead us to the place that started wars in previous centuries.

Over recent months the Hungarian parliament has continued its utterly predictable trajectory of exclusionary myth-making and minority-baiting by performatively banning Pride. In doing so it chose (again) Putin's Russia and Trump's US as its cultural compatriots. Make no mistake, there are other EU countries lining up behind Hungary<sup>4</sup>. As we prepare to defend our homelands what exactly are we defending? Our myths or our values? I would, and hope do, participate in the necessary defence of our values. I would hesitate to send anyone to die for the myriad of falsely reassuring myths we nations of Europe insist are foundational.

### *Untroubled Incoherence*

In her recent brilliant essay Jay Griffiths writes,

*Fascism begins as something in the air. Stealthy as smoke in the darkness, easier to smell than to see. Fascism sets out an ethos, not a set of policies; appeals to emotion, not fact. It begins as a pose, often a deceptive one. It likes propaganda, dislikes truth, and invests heavily in performance. Untroubled by its own incoherence, it is anti-intellectual and yet contemptuous of the populace even as it exploits the crowd mentality. Fascism is accented differently in different countries, and uses the materials — and the media — of the times<sup>4</sup>.*

At Jay Griffith's invitation let us take a closer look at The Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Europe's very own Elon Musk. We will come back to Marinetti's relationship with Mussolini, the 1930's Italian Trump, another time.

Published in 1909 Marinetti's 'Manifesto of Futurism' managed to cover war, violence, aesthetics, misogyny and technologically-induced speed in just 11 sentences:

1. *We want to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and rashness.*

2. *The essential elements of our poetry will be courage, audacity and revolt.*

3. *Literature has up to now magnified pensive immobility, ecstasy and slumber. We want to exalt movements of aggression, feverish sleeplessness, the double march, the perilous leap, the slap and the blow with the fist.*

4. *We declare that the splendor of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing automobile with its bonnet adorned with great tubes like serpents with explosive breath ... a roaring motor car which seems to run on machine-gun fire, is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace.*

5. *We want to sing the man at the wheel, the ideal axis of which crosses the earth, itself hurled along its orbit.*

6. *The poet must spend himself with warmth, glamour and prodigality to increase the enthusiastic fervor of the primordial elements.*

7. *Beauty exists only in struggle. There is no masterpiece that has not an aggressive character. Poetry must be a violent assault on the forces of the unknown, to force them to bow before man.*

8. *We are on the extreme promontory of the centuries! What is the use of looking behind at the moment when we must open the mysterious shutters of the impossible? Time and Space died yesterday. We are already living in the absolute, since we have already created eternal, omnipresent speed.*

9. *We want to glorify war — the only cure for the world — militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the anarchists, the beautiful ideas which kill, and contempt for woman.*

10. *We want to demolish museums and libraries, fight morality, feminism and all opportunist and utilitarian cowardice.*

11. *We will sing of the great crowds agitated by work, pleasure and revolt; the multi-colored and polyphonic surf of revolutions in modern capitals: the nocturnal vibration of the arsenals and the*

*workshops beneath their violent electric moons: the gluttonous railway stations devouring smoking serpents; factories suspended from the clouds by the thread of their smoke; bridges with the leap of gymnasts flung across the diabolic cutlery of sunny rivers: adventurous steamers sniffing the horizon; great-breasted locomotives, puffing on the rails like enormous steel horses with long tubes for bridle, and the gliding flight of aeroplanes whose propeller sounds like the flapping of a flag and the applause of enthusiastic crowds<sup>5</sup>.*

This manifesto, which the entrepreneurial Marinetti insisted was published in multiple languages across the European press at the same moment, became enormously influential very quickly. He was the Twitter/X freak of 1909. It became the foundation document for Italian Futurism — which was political from its inception and fundamental in shaping Fascist political style. The myth of modernity, nationalism, violence and war, techno-fetishization, the cult of masculinity and contempt for women are all interwoven and mutually reinforced. Musk and Andrew Tate combined.

When Italian Futurist ideas first arrived in Russia in March 1909 they were not embraced by the ultra nationalist Black Hundreds but rather were destined to be adopted by the left. Over time they became integrated and adapted to a new society. As Boris Groys's again points out:

*Essentially, the Soviet project was a project to break with nature, including human nature, and to build the new society as a completely artificial construction... This will toward radical artificiality inscribed the Soviet Communist project in the context of art. The Soviet political project was also at the same time an artistic project. The Russian proletarian was to be freed from the alienated work it had to carry out under the conditions of capitalist exploitation, with the goal of becoming a collective artist creating a new world — and at the same time (re)creating itself as its own artwork. Where nature was, art should be<sup>6</sup>.*

#### *Troubled Enthusiasm*

The brilliant Dziga Vertov's 1931 Soviet film *Enthusiasm*, subtitled 'The Symphony of the Donbas', opens with an explosive, jittering energy. Later this is

replaced by visual and aestheticized repetition of industrial production as ten metre rods of molten steel wrap around men's bodies like vicious snakes. Here Futurism has matured into Soviet Constructivism. Industrial sounds intercut with multiple musical forms and genres, including a reference to Shostakovich's first Symphony. It still can startle. As Vertov said:

*I had an idea about the need to enlarge our ability for organised hearing. Not limiting this ability to the boundaries of usual music. I decided to include the entire audible world into the concept of 'Hearing'<sup>18</sup>.*



*Poster for 'Enthusiasm' (1931) Sadly, the designer of this original film poster is uncredited by history.*

By pure coincidence I watched this film a few hours before Putin agreed not on a ceasefire in Ukraine but rather a suspension of bombing industrial targets in the Donbas and other Ukrainian territories — the very same industrial targets featured in Vertov's *Enthusiasm*. I invite you to pause and watch the film with this fact in mind and the troubled enthusiasm of Vertov takes on yet an additional layer. Look carefully at the final few seconds of the film. A question, a warning of a kind, is embedded here. After all the heroic work and achievement of building a new society, a new country, a parallel debate is quietly taking place: where to find the soldiers?

### *Life and Fate*

One truth remains constant in this vertiginous epoch — one which certain journalists and artists still approach, even if with a grim, reticent horror: There is such a thing as raw power.

By leaning heavily upon both story and data to develop convincing narratives, politicians have acted utterly predictably and recognisably for many familiar with working in the public realm: they juggle fictions with facts. Yet the difference between politicians and others, for example artists and journalists, is in their relationship to power.

It has always been the task of artists to craft and form metaphors through images, sound, objects, and narratives with the aim of 'shedding light' on our existence as human beings. It has never been the aim of an artist to stipulate the location of borders between countries, settle curricula design for primary schools or to determine the use of technology in a public health system. Rather, the power of the artistic metaphor is to generate emotional or cognitive impact, sometimes acting as 'a novel as weapon in hand', other times acting with the precision of a seditious heart. An effective metaphor does not forgive us our forgetfulness or the domineering insolence of the powerful. And sometimes such artistic work has a shattering impact on political or public discourse.

Journalists use metaphors somewhat differently to artists, almost, but not always, at a secondary level. The journalist's principal aim is to describe the world and events, write the first draft of history, bring facts to light through investigation, and scrutinise the actions and decisions of the powerful. But like artists, journalists have never held legislative or state power as journalists. When they have held such power, and some have, they instantly cease being journalists and become politicians. While journalists have power to influence, entertain, humiliate even, the real and only power able to enact political change, to impose its will, remains elsewhere — in the hands of politicians 'holding office'. This is done either by elected politicians using democratic tools or by those taking hold of power by brute force. And of course, there are those who get elected democratically but go on to show their authoritarian credentials.

Perhaps one truth remains constant in this intensely vertiginous epoch, a truth which certain journalists and artists still approach, even if with a grim, reticent horror: There is such a thing as raw political power presented as violence or through the implicit celebration of violence. It is loose in this world, smashing into lives and leaving the vulnerable both stunned and grief-ridden. We see brute power performed on our screens as a continuous live feed: the violence of the

Israeli destruction of Gaza; the performative violence of Trump inviting Irish fighter Conor McGregor into the Whitehouse while only recently found civilly liable for raping a Dublin woman.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that politics has become saturated with the aesthetics of violence<sup>9</sup>.

The Soviet Ukrainian Vasily Grossman (1905 to 1964) was both artist and journalist whose moral voice grew throughout his life even as his world was strangled and restricted in later years. He took the material of his vivid experience, his epoch and treated it to penetrating, searing honesty and eloquence. Much of his material explores state perpetrated violence and savagery, both Nazi and Soviet. A considerable amount of his writing was only brought to public attention in the 1990's as a result of the fall of communism. Even now, his achievements are not fully recognised in Russia or eastern ex-communist Europe in the way Tolstoy's and Bulgakov's have been.<sup>10</sup>

He was born in 1905 in Berdichev, a Ukrainian town that was home to one of the biggest Jewish communities in Europe, both his parents were Jewish. Yet Grossman grew up in a very Russified manner. He became known as Vasily from quite an early age. His work incorporates journalism, the long essay and various approaches to the novel, including the two epic novels *Stalingrad* (1952) and *Life and Fate* (1960) which we can compare in scope and ambition to those of Tolstoy. From 1923 to 1929 Grossman studied chemistry at Moscow State University. After graduating he spent two years in the coal-mining area of Donbass in Ukraine, at the same time Dziga Vertov was making his Donbass film *Enthusiasm*.

His first novels *Glyukauf* (1934) and *Stepan Kolchugin* (1937) are both about the life of Donbass miners and like his later more famous novels *Stalingrad* and *Life and Fate*, all these books are 'fiction with a firm basis in fact and imbued with a deep concern for both public and private morality'. During his career Grossman witnessed or heard first-hand accounts of the rise of Soviet industrialisation and the Ukrainian Terror famine in 1932–33. This famine, the Holodomor, led to the death of three to five million Ukrainian peasants as described by the character and witness, Anna Sergeevna, in his great unfinished novel *Everything Flows* (1955).<sup>11</sup>

During World War Two Grossman served as a journalist on the front line at Stalingrad and then, after moving through Ukraine with Soviet forces, he entered Poland. After the war his work went on to address

the themes of Stalinist purges and the Soviet Gulags as well as the fate of the Jews, including those in the Ukrainian town of Berdichev, where his own mother had been a victim of the Nazis along with around thirty thousand others.<sup>12</sup>

Grossman was the first writer to make a substantial and systematic comparison of the horrors of Hitler's Nazism with Stalin's communism. In *Life and Fate* (1959) one of his characters says:

*To me, a distinction based on social origin seems legitimate and moral. But the Germans obviously consider a distinction based on nationality to be equally moral. One thing I am certain of: it's terrible to kill someone simply because he's a Jew. They're people like any others — good, bad, gifted, stupid, stolid, cheerful, kind, sensitive, greedy... Hitler says none of that matters — all that matters is that they're Jewish. And I protest with my whole being. But then we have the same principle: what matters is whether or not you're the son of an aristocrat, the son of a merchant, the son of a kulak; and whether you're good-natured, wicked, gifted, kind, stupid, happy is neither here nor there. And we're not talking about the merchants, priests and aristocrats themselves — but about their children and grandchildren. Does noble blood run in one's veins like Jewishness? Is one a priest or a merchant by heredity?*<sup>13</sup>

Unlike Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which was also written in 1959 and published the same year, Grossman's book did not get published for many decades. Every copy of Grossman's manuscript of *Life and Fate* and its drafts were seized by the KGB — even his typewriter ribbons were taken away. His friends' apartments and publisher's offices were ransacked. "My book was arrested but I am free," he said. In a letter to the senior politician Mikhail Suslov, he wrote: "There's no logic, no truth, in the present condition, in my physical freedom when the book to which I have given my life is in prison... I ask for my book's freedom." He received no reply.

In 1944 Grossman accompanied Soviet troops into Poland. In July he, with the Soviet Army, entered Majdanek, the first of six concentration camps to be liberated. In September they arrived at Treblinka and witnessed the interrogation of captured Ukrainian guards and an executioner. First published in Novem-



Marc Chagal's 'The Ukrainian family' painted in 1941–1943.

ber in the newspaper *Znamya* Grossman's *The Hell of Treblinka* re-writes the genre of investigative journalism. As Alexandra Popoff tells us the essay, 'transcends its epoch and a single genre, being at once a work of investigative journalism, a historical and philosophical essay, and a requiem to the victims. His writing has the everlasting quality of genuine art, inviting comparison to Picasso's *Guernica*'<sup>14</sup>.

Grossman's account of Treblinka was one of the very first written accounts to be made of the camps;

*After this, in the leaden silence, the crowd would hear words that the Scharführer repeated several times a day for a month after month: "Men are to remain where they are. Women and children must go to the barracks on the left and undress".*

*This, according to the accounts of eyewitnesses, marked the start of heartrending scenes. Love — maternal, conjugal, or filial love — told people that they were seeing one another for the last time. Handshakes, kisses, blessings, tears, brief hurried words into which people put all their love, all their pain, all their tenderness, all their despair... The SS psychiatrists of death knew that*

*all this must be cut short, that these feelings must be stifled at once. The psychiatrists of death knew the simple laws that operate in slaughterhouses all over the world, laws which, in Treblinka, were exploited by brute beasts on order to deal with human beings. This was a critical moment: the moment when daughters were separated from fathers, mothers from sons, grandmothers from grandsons, husbands from wives.*<sup>15</sup>

Grossman's call to us is to listen, to acknowledge, yet to remain active — proactive as human beings, able to predict and intervene in our own epoch should, or rather when, that call comes. He is quietly convinced that the moment will arrive again when politicians would blend fiction with fact to make supremely easy the path to mass murder. In fact, we know they already have done so on numerous occasions since 1945. Yet Grossman's call maintains force and power to reach us today. I doubt that he would neither forgive us our forgetfulness or the domineering insolence of the powerful. *The Hell of Treblinka* again:

*Every man and woman today is duty-bound to his or her conscience, to his or her son and to his or her mother, to their motherland and to humanity as a whole to devote all the powers of their heart and mind to answering these questions: What is it that has given birth to racism? What can be done to prevent Nazism from ever rising again, either on this side or on the far side of the ocean? What can be done to make sure that Hitlerism is never, never in all eternity resurrected? What led Hitler and his followers to construct Majdanek, Sobibor, Belzec, Auschwitz, and Treblinka is the imperialist idea of exceptionalism — of racial, national, and every other kind of exceptionalism.*

*We must remember that Fascism and racism will emerge from this war not only with the bitterness of defeat but also with sweet memories of the ease with which it is possible to commit mass murder. It has turned out that it is really not so difficult to kill entire nations.*

*Ten small chambers — hardly enough space, if properly furnished, to stable a hundred horses — ten such chambers turned out to be enough to kill three million people.*

*Killing turned out to be supremely easy — it does not entail any uncommon expenditure.*

*It is possible to build five hundred such chambers in only a few days. This is no more difficult than constructing a five-story building...*

*It is possible to demonstrate with nothing more than a pencil that any large construction company with experience in the use of reinforced concrete*

*can, in the course of six months and with a properly organised labour force, construct more than enough chambers to gas the entire population of the earth.*

*This must be unflinchingly borne in mind by everyone who truly values honour, freedom, and the life of all nations, the life of humanity.<sup>16</sup>*

*This text is dedicated to the memory of journalist Hossam Shabat (2001 to March 2025).<sup>17</sup>*

#### Comments:

<sup>1</sup> For the original texts and full notes visit Enthusiasm and Life and Fate at Clickbait Citizen on Substack.

<sup>2</sup> See Baldwin, C And the Statues Come Alive Again Clickbait Citizen, Substack March 2025.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/630673/under-the-museum-s-gaze>

<sup>4</sup> Associated Press on Hungary's Pride.

<sup>5</sup> Jay Griffiths <https://aeon.co/essays/the-macho-violent-culture-of-italian-fascism-was-prophetic>

<sup>6</sup> Download Futurist Manifesto.

<sup>7</sup> Groys, B The Total Art of Stalinism (2011) page 121.

<sup>8</sup> [https://monoskop.org/Dziga\\_Vertov](https://monoskop.org/Dziga_Vertov)

<sup>9</sup> Irish fighter Conor McGregor into the Whitehouse Politico (March 25th 2025).

<sup>10</sup> The Russian/English translator Robert Chandler has dedicated much of his life to translating and writing about Grossman as well as other writers including Andrey Platonov, Teffi and Isaac Babel. His introductions and notes to Grossman's books are encyclopaedic and endlessly generous. For a near exhaustive evaluation of Grossman in English allow yourself to be led by Robert Chandler.

<sup>11</sup> Vasily Grossman Everything Flows (first published 1970).

<sup>12</sup> See Beevor, A and Vinogradova, L: A Writer at War - Vasily Grossman with the Red Army 1941–1945 (2006).

<sup>13</sup> Vasily Grossman Life and Fate (1960 — first published in 1980).

<sup>14</sup> Alexandra Popoff Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century (2019) p173.

<sup>15</sup> PDF download of The Hell of Treblinka (1945).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ethnic cleansing, genocide and crimes against humanity, all have been used in living memory as policies of state and nation-state building across much of Europe and beyond.

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### **Болдвін Кріс**

#### **Ентузіазм. Розмова з Дзигією Вертовим та Василям Гроссманом**

*Анотація.* Стаття присвячена пам'яті палестинського журналіста Хоссама Шабата, який загинув 24 березня 2025 року внаслідок бомбардування Сектора Гази на 24 році свого життя. Автор розглядає культурні та історичні наративи, що обґрунтовують чи, навпаки, виступають проти ідеї насильства в сучасному світі й здатні справити глибший вплив на пересічного «громадянина клікбейту». Історичні паралелі з сучасними світовими лідерами дозволяють ширше подивитися на події, що ніби повторюються в численних дзеркалах. Творчість українських митців Дзиги Вертова і Василя Гроссмана дають можливість оцінити роль і вплив мистецтва на суспільне мислення. Автор пропонує також актуальний список літератури, де розкрито злочини проти людства: етнічні чистки та культурний геноцид.

*Ключові слова:* культурний та історичний наратив, російська агресія, когнітивний вплив, мистецтво і війна.